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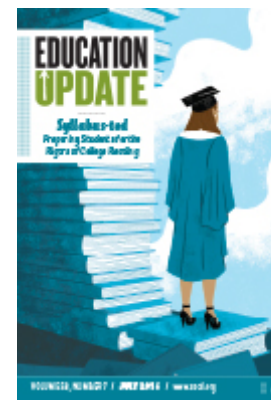
Syllabus-ted: Preparing Students for the Rigors of College Reading

Get Rid of Rows! and Other Tips for a Student-Centered Classroom

Sarah McKibben

When Pamela Kennedy took over Room 17 at Meriwether Lewis Elementary School in Portland, Ore., "it was an unmitigated disaster." The 3rd grade classroom was so cluttered that "you had to sidle to get between table groups."

Kennedy wanted her young students "to be able to move at their own pace," not get distracted or physically inhibited by a disorganized classroom. So she got to work removing the excess, clearing bins from shelves, pulling down posters that blocked the windows' natural light, and whittling seven large file cabinets down to one. Backpacks and coats were moved to racks in the hallway and even the trays beneath the desks were banished



BUY THIS ISSUE

1. Edit the Junk

Decluttering is just one way educators are making the school environment—what some experts call "the third teacher"—more accessible and student-centered. With a few hours of sweat and labor, classrooms can be transformed from messy to minimalist.

"Pick up a bunch of boxes with handles and start to prune," advises Kennedy. Look at your personal library and think about the last time you referenced "all those books that accumulate from workshops or from [earning your] degree." Recycle, donate, or move what you don't need into home storage. Then tackle your classroom library, picking up each book and asking, "Is this an attractive book? Is a child going to want to read it? Is it outdated or not culturally current?" Finally, get rid of distracting decorations and sort through paper piles.

Once you've pared down, "you have to edit and be really thoughtful about what you allow back in," relates Kennedy. In her classroom, students create posters that are hung at eye level and can easily reach the organized bins, shelves, and tables. Individual dry-erase boards reduce paper dependency and allow for "quick formative assessment."

Maintenance may take a little practice, but after coaching your students to use the materials and move through the space, they "can be successful [in it] without you having to lead them."

2. Dump Your Desk

As part of the redesign process, teachers may want to examine their own desks. "I don't like the idea of the teacher's desk, for the same reason I don't like a necktie," says instructional coach Blake Wiggs. "I feel like it represents an authoritarian role." Teachers need workspaces, he assures, but their desks "don't need to be the focal point."

Nicholas Provenzano heartily agrees. The blogger (www.thenerdyteacher.com) and English teacher at Grosse Pointe South High School in Michigan recently swapped his "gigantic 1950s-style metal desk" for a tiny table in the corner of the room where he checks attendance through district software.

Dumping the albatross not only freed up valuable square footage, but also removed "that barrier, the 'no-go' teacher zone" that students tend to avoid. Provenzano now circulates around the room and students feel more comfortable approaching him with questions.

3. Say Good-Bye to Soldier Rows

Seating arrangements have the power to nurture or derail collaboration. Although traditional "soldier rows" are ideal for tests and quizzes, they compel students to "stare in the front [of the classroom] and not talk," notes Wiggs.

Instead, he helps teachers experiment with multiple seating patterns, such as islands and horseshoes. In *Rethinking Classroom Design: Create Student-Centered Learning Spaces for 6-12th Graders*, Wiggs recommends trying a seating configuration app, such as SmartSeat, Be Seated, or Safety Attendance. Then "sit in the chairs and think about how [the setup] feels." Can students get up and move around easily? Can they see the board? Can they quickly turn to the peers and work as a team?

"When the norms are columns, [you can't try] group work out of nowhere and expect these magical teams to neatly develop," remarks Wiggs. "You have to create rituals." Even at the high school level, teachers should assign and practice roles for a smoother "orchestration of clean-up and setup." Adding tennis balls to the bottom of chairs to dampen the noise is another tip for smoother transition times.

4. Give Them Guided Choice

"The schedule that you set up is essentially Groundhog Day so that they know the routine," confirms Kennedy. Even within routines, you can leave room for choice. For instance, Kennedy lets her students pick a new seat every Friday. At the beginning of the year, "you'll often see best friends sitting next to each other," she admits. But if they talk incessantly and get three strikes, she leads a round of rock-paper-scissors that determines new seating for one of them. Eventually, the students learn to choose wisely.

"Eight- and nine-year-olds have a great deal of pride in their ability to be independent," explain Kennedy. By allowing them to choose their seats, "they've gained confidence in choosing what works for their learning style, and feel like they have more ability to negotiate their world successfully."

Wiggs suggests assigning groups (and seats) as a way to scaffold collaboration. Arrange the classroom so that students know where to go when they arrive. Repeat this several times, and students will learn which arrangements align with which learning activities.

Eventually, you want students to be able to pick their own teams, Wiggs acknowledges. But they're going to be more successful if you give them models first.

5. Vary the Furniture

Prakash Nair, a school design architect and author of *Blueprint for Tomorrow: Redesigning Schools for Student-Centered Learning*, concedes that teachers are often "limited by the kinds of opportunities and pedagogies that the [typical classroom] space"—and furniture—allow.

"When we talk about 21st century classrooms, [we have] to get past the idea that all students should be sitting in the same kind of furniture," Nair points out.

Varying your furniture doesn't have to be costly. For example, a teacher in Singapore with "no budget" reconfigured her classroom with chairs, couches, high tables, and other furniture sourced from the community. "The teacher and the students love being in that room, and they don't even realize they're learning. It becomes a byproduct of all the great stuff they're doing in the class," says Nair. Another classroom in Finland has "half as many chairs as they have students" to encourage them to stand and circulate.

Provenzano made a small change by replacing the attached desk/chair units in his classroom with individual chairs and desks. Now, students "can get up and move their desks [into whatever] formation fits the learning activity—and they can do it on the fly."

When Kennedy took over her 3rd grade classroom, she had an ambitious plan: she wanted to replace all 30 metal chairs with more flexible seating, despite knowing "it was going to be a process and I didn't want to use my own money." Over the course of several years, she phased in new furniture, piece by piece, turning to local grants and [DonorsChoose.org](https://www.donorschoose.org) for the funds. The new mix of stools, cantilever chairs, and seats with casters keeps students mobile—switching effortlessly between whole-group lessons, collaborative work, and individual learning on their laptops.

6. Create Comfortable, Functional Spaces

Kennedy also created "untraditional spaces" with new built-ins—reading bleachers and nooks (converted from coat cubbies) that "the children gravitate to." Provenzano turned an area in the back of his classroom into a small stage where students can congregate in groups or pairs. It's equipped with comfortable seating and, most important, lots of room to brainstorm.

Consider "giving classroom walls to your kids," he advises. Provenzano covered the back of his classroom with huge, flexible dry-erase boards; converted a door into a "dream door" where students record their goals; and painted the top of students' desks with dry-erase paint. "Basically everything in my room can be written on," which has created "these massive collaborative spaces."

"They feel like it's a very adult thing to do—to stand up, jot down your idea, and discuss it," he says.

Old Habits Die Hard

Redesigning your classroom to the tune of students' needs, rather than convenience or habit, can be daunting.

"When the space isn't focused on the teacher and his desk, it's all over the place," Provenzano notes. "And that sounds scary and chaotic, but it's not. The attention is [focused on] wherever the conversation is happening."

These more nuanced, collaborative classrooms actually expand pedagogical opportunities, concludes Nair. "It's seeing space as a resource, whereas before it was a limitation." **EU**

Sarah McKibben is the managing editor of *Education Update*.

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